

The writer, the horseshoe crab, his
'golden blossom' and her clients:
tales of prostitution in contemporary
Thai short stories

Rachel Harrison

The short stories which form the basis of this analysis of prostitution in modern Thailand were all written within the past quarter of a century, the earliest dating back to 1972. They are intended to represent as broad a cross-section of works as possible, by both male and female writers, and to deal with all groups engaged in prostitution, that is, not only with female sex workers but with their clients, their pimps (*maengda*), and their madams (*mae lao*).¹ The selection of stories is limited, however, in that it refers only to female prostitutes and their male clients, male prostitution being widely perceived to exist only as a response to a Western or tourist-orientated market. My priority in writing this paper has been to readdress the topic of Thai prostitution within an entirely South East Asian context, since the main treatment of this subject in both Western scholarly works and the Western media has focused upon its relationship to Western tourism.²

It has long been argued that prostitution came into existence in Thailand as a response to the demands of American GIs on rest and recreation leave in Thailand during the Vietnam war. Following the end of the war, entertainment places and massage parlours instead became a significant

¹ In Thai the word *maengda* originally refers to a horseshoe crab which survives by clinging to the back of its female mate and which dies when she does. *Mae lao* comprises two words, the first meaning 'mother', the second 'cage' or 'coop'. This combination covers the madam's dual role as custodian and warder of the prostitutes with whom she works. They, in turn, address her as 'mother' and frequently refer to themselves in their relationship with her as *nu* ('little girl') or *luk* ('daughter'). Numerous words are used to refer to prostitutes, the most common in short stories being *sopheni* and *phuying borikan* (service girl). The pejorative term *do'k tho'ng* (golden blossom), designates a woman of dubious virtue and is referred to in the title of this paper.

² For exceptions to this see Pamela DaGrossa, 'Kamphaeng Din: a study of prostitution in the all-Thai brothels of Chiang Mai city', *Crossroads*, 4 (2), 1989, pp. 1-7. Pasuk Phongpaichit's monograph on Bangkok masseuses does also make reference to the cheapest establishments catering to local clientele. See Pasuk Phongpaichit, *From peasant girls to Bangkok masseuses*. Geneva: International Labour Office, 1982, *passim*. See also Suporn Koetsawang and Nicholas Ford, *An investigation into the psycho-social factors influencing condom use among female sex workers in Thailand, 1993*. Bangkok: Usa Press, 1993; and N.J. Ford and Chamratrithong, ed., *UK/Thai collaborative research development in reproductive and sexual health*. Bangkok: IPSR, Mahidol University (forthcoming).

attraction for Western tourists who have travelled to Thailand in increasing numbers from the second half of the 1970s.³ While the existence of foreigners in Thailand has led to a proliferation of certain forms of prostitution, this does little to explain why currently only approximately 2% of Thailand's prostitutes are engaged in offering tourist-orientated services.⁴

In her study of Bangkok masseuses, Pasuk Phongpaichit argues that the presence of American GI's in Thailand was only one of a number of factors leading to the expansion of the prostitution industry during the 1970s. Instead she stresses the sinicization of Bangkok as a major catalyst for the social acceptability of taking a 'minor wife' (*nia noi*) and the adoption of the royal tradition of concubinage by the rising middle-classes as cultural causes for an increase in prostitution. Coupled with this were, according to Pasuk, economic factors, most significantly the lack of employment available to young people in the rural north and north-east, which precipitated their migration to the capital in search of work.⁵

The evolution of the sexual service industry in Thailand must thus be seen as the result of a number of historical, economic and social factors coming together in a particular configuration. On the one hand, there is the rural society of the outlying areas which emphasises the social and economic role of women, and this combines with the pressures of poverty and seemingly unlimited earning opportunities for women through urban migration. On the other hand, there is the adaptation and historical elaboration of the marital norms and privileges of the elite. This created a culture of polygamy and concubinage which apparently legitimates the commoditisation of women. The influx of foreign military personnel associated with successive wars in the Asia arena helped to create the infrastructure for widespread prostitution, but the marketing of erotic tourism began to build upon that foundation even before this clientele began to fade away.⁶

The tendency to attribute the problem of prostitution in Thailand to outsiders is depicted in Bantoon Klankhao's *Lom hai cai kho'ng khwam*

³ The annual number of tourists visiting Thailand in 1960 was 181,340, rising to 1,037,737 in 1973. By 1985 this figure had risen to 2,438,270 and stood, by 1989, at 4,300,000. (Figures quoted from the Tourist Authority of Thailand.)

⁴ Tim Forsyth, 'Anger in the land of smiles', *Independent*, 23 June 1990, p. 44.

⁵ See Pasuk Phongpaichit, op. cit., pp. 1-6.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

cep puat ('A breath of pain'), written in the mid 1970s.⁷ 'A breath of pain' is set in the southern town of Had Yai, famed for its raunchy nightspots catering to short-time visitors from across the border with Malaysia.⁸ Although Bantoon notes that visitors to Had Yai also include Thais from both Bangkok and the provinces, the Malay clients form the focus of criticism in this piece, both for the arrogance they show in the knowledge that their money has eight times more purchasing power than the Thai baht; and for the acts of cruelty and violence they perpetrate against the Thai women whose time they buy.

When Kham Fo'ng, a prostitute who was sold into the job for a fee of 2,500 baht (approximately £60), complains of her ill-treatment to the story's narrator, she uses the derogatory pronoun *man*, or 'it', to refer to her Malaysian client:⁹

'He (the pimp) forced me to go with a Malay. A revolting, great big bloke. And a wierdo with it. I've been with him loads of times. He beats me till I'm black and blue all over. And even when I get down on my hands and knees and beg him to stop he won't. There's not the least bit of kindness in him.'¹⁰

Acts of violence are not merely the preserve of the client, however, for when another young girl shows her reluctance to sleep with the Malay, it earns her a violent beating at the hands of the *mae lao*. To appease her waiting customer, the madam explains that this girl is now too bruised to provide him with any pleasure and she instead presents him with a virgin, Kham Yat. At the sight of Kham Yat, the Malay licks his lips with interest, then ascertains whether or not the 'goods' are genuine, and finally haggles over the price he must pay to take her back over the border with him as a wife. Having agreed to let Kham Yat go for 2000 baht (less than £50) the madam

⁷ No date for the publication of this story is available. It appears in a collection of works by a variety of different writers, entitled *Sophehi thi rak* ('Beloved prostitutes'), Bangkok: S.S. Press, undated. Bantoon first came to public attention as a short story writer in 1975 when his first piece, *Sing thi long lu'a* ('Lifetowers') was published in Suchat Sawatsi's anthology of contemporary short stories, *Laeng khien* ('Hardship'). Bangkok: Duang Kamol.

⁸ It is estimated that 20% of the tourists entering Thailand for sexual services are from Malaysia and Singapore.

⁹ The prefix Kham shows Kham Fo'ng to be of northern Thai origin and the narrator explains that she is from the Mae Sai district of Chiangmai province. Among the sample of fifty prostitutes interviewed by Pasuk, 48% were found to originate from the North, 26% from the North East, 20% from the Central Plain, and 2% from the South. Dr Thepanom's study of 1,000 girls found an even higher percentage from the North, viz. 75% (Pasuk, op. cit., p. 12.)

¹⁰ See Bantoon Klankhao's, op. cit., p. 130. It is worth noting here that Kham Fo'ng also uses the word *man* to refer to her Thai pimp.

bids her farewell with instructions to let her new husband do everything with her that he pleases.

Instances of violence or of sadomasochistic practices do not, however, appear to be a feature of the interaction between prostitutes and their native Thai clients in the short stories under analysis. This would support the view of anthropologist, Herbert Phillips, that sadomasochism is not part of the Thai sexual repertoire, and that most Thais perceive sex as 'simple, primitive fun'.¹¹ Instead Phillips argues, with reference to the writings of 'Rong Wongsawan, that the violence described between pimps and prostitutes 'is always a violence of interpersonal dominance, never a violence that intrudes upon or confuses the physical pleasures of lovemaking'.¹² Thai short stories testify to this through their repeated references to the brutality of pimps and madams, whose cruelty is manifested not only by acts of physical violence but by their incarceration of the women, or, at the very least, by the restriction of their freedom.¹³

In Banthoon Klankhao's 'A breath of pain', Kham Fo'ng is allowed out of the brothel only for a limited amount of time, to go shopping for some make-up. When the narrator offers to take her away with him from Had Yai, so that she can either return to her home village or go to live with him, she declines his offer. Kham Fo'ng explains that it would be too

¹¹ Herbert Phillips, *Modern Thai literature*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1987, p. 323.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 325 (footnote 3).

¹³ Only one story, *Khwam tai kho'ng maengda* ('The death of a pimp') by Wat Wanlyangkun opposes this trend. Published in 1979, it tells the tale of Lamlet, a boy from a deprived background who, despite his intelligence, is obliged to leave school prematurely because of the death of his mother. Lamlet's mother is killed by a stray bullet when the police shoot at local gangsters who have gone for a night's entertainment in the brothel next door to Lamlet's house.

Lamlet describes how the police beat the pimp, forcing him to stand aside while they rape and beat the women under his protection. In a school essay he writes before his mother's death, Lamlet announces that when he grows up he wants to become a pimp:

My father says that when I grow up I must be a dog. [...] But my mother says that I must be a person because she is a person. But my mother also says that even though my father is a dog I must be a person. But I want to be half dog and half person. Lamlet's essay, filled with the word 'but', made us all shake with laughter, but he read on intently, explaining that being a pimp was not as bad as being half dog, half person. It was an important job. And he had made up his mind to be a good pimp, to protect the prostitutes and to prevent them from being victimized and picked on by the 'cheating police and the mobsters'. He even suggested that it was better to be a good pimp than a bad policeman. (See Wat Wanlyangkun, *Khwam tai kho'ng maengda*, in *Khao khuen* ('The Famine'), Bangkok: Klum Kula Press, 1979, p. 108.)

Lamlet does become a pimp when he leaves school and is later shot by the police. 'The death of a pimp' is as much an anti-establishment, anti-police story as it is about prostitution and the merits of being a pimp. It was written by Wat at the height of his commitment to the Communist Party of Thailand, when his fiction served the purpose of anti-state propaganda.

dangerous, since she would be pursued by gangs in the employ of the brothel owner and that, if they found her, they would kill her. Nor would she receive protection from the law, since the police are always in the pay of the brothels. Instead Kham Fo'ng bids the narrator farewell and rushes away, fearing a beating should she be keeping a customer waiting.

Kham Fo'ng's captivity is based not only upon the threat to her personal safety but on the social stigma attached to the reputation she has gained by working as a prostitute. The term used in Thai to refer to such women is *phuying sia*, literally a woman (*phuying*) who has been 'lost', 'wasted' or 'gone rotten' (*sia*). As Kham Fo'ng herself explains to the narrator, it is too late for her to try to leave the brothel, since her purity has long since been damaged and destroyed.¹⁴

In her study of Bangkok masseuses, Pasuk points out that over half of the women she interviewed had already been married before they became prostitutes, while many of the remainder had lost their virginity before they began work.¹⁵ Their reasons for becoming prostitutes were, apart from economic ones, related to a sense that once their sexual purity had been lost to a man, their reputations as 'good' women had already been ruined. In the case of women abandoned by their husbands and faced with the sole responsibility of bringing up a child, relatively well-paid, unskilled employment as a prostitute may offer the most practical solution to their crisis.

This situation is illustrated by Oi in Sidaoru'ang's *Mu't laew sawang* ('Light after dark') whose circumstances are described as follows:

'Well, I had a baby, you see. I'd not been with my husband all that long. My mother didn't like me. She picked a fight with me and drove me out of the house. Actually, she was only my stepmother. My real mother died ages ago. When my baby was less than a year old my husband ran off with another woman. So I didn't know what on earth to do. I had to bring my baby up on my own. And, on top of that I didn't want to swallow my pride and go back home to ask for help. I haven't had much of an education - I left school when I was ten'. Oi related her story with some determination.

'The day I made up my mind to go for a job here I thought it over and over, really I did. But I thought it over on my own. There was no one I could ask for advice. And I didn't know what else I could do. I didn't have any money at the time. My stepmother

¹⁴ Banthoon, *op. cit.*, p. 139.

¹⁵ Pasuk, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

wouldn't have me back in the house and my husband refused to send me any money for our baby. He'd run off with another woman, so why should he be interested in me any more?

I got so hungry, I could hardly stand it. Can you imagine? I wondered just how hungry my baby would have to get? I hardly had any milk. And, because I'd always stood up to my stepmother's insults, I didn't dare go back and face her. My dad's terrified of her. He's as timid as a mouse when he's with her. So he wasn't going to stand up for me, was he? I wandered around all day, looking for work. When I saw the notice, advertising for waitresses here, I thought I'd risk it and see, even though I knew I'd have to go off and sleep with the customers. I thought I'd just grit my teeth and bear it. It's true, really'.¹⁶

Oi consequently applies for a job in what is euphemistically referred to as a 'closed doors' restaurant, one whose customers 'were not merely interested in dinner' and who knew what additional attractions such an eating house had to offer.¹⁷

In writing 'Light after dark' Sidaoru'ang drew on her own past experience of working as a cashier in just such a restaurant, one which also provided her with the material to produce a slightly earlier short story, *Khrang nu'ng*, *nan ma laew* ('Once upon a time, long, long ago').¹⁸ First published in 1975, 'Once upon a time, long, long ago' takes a less sympathetic attitude to a young prostitute, Noi, who is portrayed as reckless and immature in her failure to take precautions against becoming pregnant. When an older female friend, the cashier in the restaurant where Noi works, advises her to go to hospital for an abortion, Noi refuses on the grounds that she will be chastised by the nurses. Instead she prescribes herself some medicine, and, when this proves ineffective, is directed by her friend to an illegal abortionist (*mo' tamyaë*) who massages her stomach for a period of several days. Still Noi does not abort the child, though the treatment does kill it and, as it begins to rot in her womb, she is obliged to go to hospital. The story closes with the scene of Noi lying in a hospital corridor, being

¹⁶ See Sidaoru'ang, *A drop of glass*. Introduced and translated by Rachel Harrison. Bangkok: Duang Kamol, 1994, p. 109. For a full translation of this story into English, see *ibid.*, pp. 107-16.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 107.

¹⁸ The 'closed doors' restaurant in which Sidaoru'ang worked in the early 1970s was called Nuan Napha and was located in the Saphan Khwai district of Bangkok, well known as a red light district for Thai clientele.

chastised by a nurse for her recklessness. Sidaoru'ang clearly intends a moral message in this text, which ends on a note of authorial intervention:

'This tale teaches that sexual oppression as a result of stupidity and ignorance is a burden which we must all join together in eradicating through education. So please, do not hope to derive any pleasure from a tale such as this ...'¹⁹

In 'Light after dark', published five years later, the cashier/narrator shows an initial indifference to Oi's circumstances, believing her to be the same as all the other prostitutes who work at the restaurant, and having no interest in hearing the particular details of Oi's past. Nevertheless, the more she learns of Oi's background, the more she grows to understand and sympathize with her. She comes to terms with this sentiment that Oi provokes in her by casting Oi in her own mind as 'different' from the other women who work there. Oi dresses differently, for example, wearing her long hair loose in an unpretentious fashion that makes her seem girlish, innocent, and pure. This is not sufficient, however, to prevent the narrator from drawing her own, cynical conclusions when she hears that Oi has been invited by a customer to leave:

Oi had not been working in the restaurant much over three months before she began to look more cheerful, like a young girl whose head had been turned by first love. I just thought sadly to myself how they all end up down the same track. They all swear blind they'll never forget, but they always do in the end.²⁰

In 'Light after dark' Oi is redeemed in the eyes of the narrator only by leaving her job as a prostitute and becoming a bus conductress, whereupon she joins the trade union movement and is assassinated for her involvement in strike activities. It is only by this path that the author/narrator perceives Oi as someone who has moved from moral darkness into light. Nowhere is this better illustrated than in an excerpt from the text in which the narrator meets Oi in her new work and learns that she has found herself a husband:

'Does he know about your past?' I couldn't help but enquire, given the kind of profession that Oi had once engaged in: for, after all,

¹⁹ Sidaoru'ang, *Kaew yot diaw* ('A drop of glass'). Bangkok: Met Sai Press, 1983, p. 124. The story was first published in the journal *Akso'rasat phican* in 1975.

²⁰ Sidaoru'ang, *A drop of glass*, p. 111.

society is quite unforgiving in the way it brands such women, and their background isn't easily overlooked.

'Yes, he knows. Somebody told him. I even admitted it to him myself, but he was very nice about it. He never says anything about my past that will hurt my feelings. I wasn't very happy about it to start with, and I couldn't look anyone straight in the eye, but now I understand. My friends at work who are in the union have told me all kinds of things. I don't care about my past any more. I just tell all the old gossips that if anyone's got any questions to ask, they can ask me to my face and I'll tell them the details myself. I tell them there's no need to go around asking other people and getting it all wrong. Oh, you know what it's like. When you're hungry who's going to come along and find you some food. I know. I may have been a whore, but I didn't get my money for nothing. I wasn't as well off as some women who just hold out their hands and ask for money from their husbands and then go off and gamble it all away. Are they still going to despise me for being no good when I've been down and then managed to fight my way back up again. Sure, if my stomach was full and I still went out to earn my living that way, then they'd have the right to complain. But not now, surely?'

For a split second I couldn't help thinking of something I'd heard somewhere - 'Look first. Those who are in the dark and then see the light deserve praise; but those who are in the light and revert to darkness deserve to be despised.'

I realized that Oi had taught me something, much more than I had taught her back in the days when I had kept my watchful eye on her in that den of sin we both worked in.²¹

The closing paragraph of this quotation marks the first real instance of a turning point in Sidaoru'ang's perception of the hardships a prostitute might endure. It is worth noting here, however, that while she depicts her prostitutes in a much less sentimental light than do male writers, Sidaoru'ang/the cashier's involvement in their lives is perhaps a more constructive one. Moreover, 'Light after dark' acknowledges the unpleasantry and suffering of Oi's work as a prostitute in her own words. Speaking of her customers, Oi testifies:

²¹ Ibid., pp. 114-15.

'They might fancy me, but they still despise me all the same. They just don't understand what I have to go through to earn my living. And even then I have to go halves with the manager on what money I do get. Some people just don't realize. They think it's easy for women like me to earn a living. They think all you have to do is dress up nicely, lie flat out on your back, legs spread, and just wait for the money to roll in. My God! Where's the fun in that? They want to do all sorts of things to you - turn you over on your stomach, turn you over on your back, do it standing, do it sitting. You've got to do whatever you're told. It's once in a blue moon you end up with someone half normal. There's been loads of times I've wondered whether I can stand it any longer.'²²

Although Banthoon Klankhaco'n also acknowledges the unpleasant nature of a prostitute's daily work, in equally graphic terms, he does so not in their own words but through his reinterpretation of their experience. Referring to the prostitutes awaiting the perusal of potential clients, Banthoon writes:

They cannot have known . . . the incredible power that alcohol has to reduce all feelings to only the most basic instincts - foul, stinking smells, lust and the overwhelming desire to take one of those women on show and fill her with semen. Oh, those poor, poor women; as if they had no feelings of their own.²³

There appears to be a greater tendency among female writers to portray the experience of the prostitute in her own words and from her own perspective; at least, this is seen to be the case in the later works of Sidaoru'ang and in a piece by the women's rights activist, Niramon Pru'thatho'n.

Basing her text on her experience as a journalist, Niramon wrote *Wan we'la kho'ng la kap tannan con mai ru cop* ('A time for La and a tale that never ends') for *Siam Rat* daily newspaper in August 1981.²⁴ The short story describes the day-to-day existence of a young, Northern woman, La, in one of the high-class massage parlours that exist on the first floor of many ordinary parlours. 'A time for La and a tale that never ends' takes the form of an interview with La, in which she reveals that she has worked in the

²² Ibid., pp. 110-11

²³ Banthoon, op. cit., p. 129.

²⁴ The story was reprinted in Niramon Pru'thatho'n, *Rao pen din sai* ('We are the earth'). Bangkok: Sinlapaannakhaan, undated.

parlour for the past seven years, since the age of thirteen, and that she has spent the past four years performing specialized massage for Westerners and wealthy Thai clients who can afford her more expensive services.²⁵ La's explanation, that she comes from Changmai province, that she left school after four years of primary education, and that she came to work in Bangkok in order to fund the education of her younger brothers and sisters is, unsurprisingly, similar to the history of many of the masseuses interviewed by Pasuk in her 1982 survey.²⁶ La refused the offer of marriage made to her by her very first client, an Italian, on the grounds that she did not much care for foreigners and preferred living in Thailand. Her decision was based on the safety of what is familiar – that Thais eat rice instead of bread, that she could understand what people were saying, and that she always knew how to find help in a crisis. Despite his rejection, the Italian retains some commitment to La, paying for her to attend a beauty school on a part-time basis so that, in the future, she might qualify to open her own salon. La wakes early to attend classes before going to work from 6 p.m. to 1 a.m. on weekdays and 2 p.m. to 1 a.m. at weekends. For her labours she earns a relatively high salary of 3,000 baht (c. £80) per month.

Like Oi, in Sidaoru'ang's 'Light after dark' and Kham Fo'ng in Banthoon's 'A breath of pain', La testifies to the dangers and maltreatment to which she and her colleagues are frequently exposed. She relates instances of muggings and theft by clients and explains that her customers are often drunk and abusive. Although La reserves the right to refuse the most distasteful among them, she realizes that it is her role to provide her clients with an opportunity to release their emotions, and not to focus upon her own thoughts and feelings.

As Sidaoru'ang became a more established writer and gained a stronger sense of her own, feminine identity and sexuality, so her work began to reflect a greater awareness of women's rights and a greater sympathy for their suffering. Symptomatic of this gradual change is the short story she produced three years after 'Light after dark', in 1983, entitled *Nuan kap lo'm lae khuat nam nai mu'* ('Nuan, Lo'm and a bottle at the ready'). Having been abandoned by her husband, Nuan turns to prostitution and is depicted at the beginning of the piece entertaining a client too drunk to remove his own clothing. He commands Nuan to undress him and then lies naked on the bed, expecting her to give him sexual satisfaction. As Nuan hesitates in

contemplation of the distasteful task ahead of her, he rolls over and pulls her down on top of him and she catches the smell of alcohol and sweat. Their love-making is far from pleasurable for either party and tears begin to well in Nuan's eyes as the client flounders around on top of her. Eventually he loses patience, and tells her to stop crying and to masturbate him so that he can get dressed and go home. But Nuan is unable to do as he orders. In his anger and irritation he throws Nuan from the bed, whereupon she seizes a nearby water-bottle and raises it threateningly and in self-defence.

Nuan's recourse to violence marks the beginning of a truly positive portrayal in Sidaoru'ang's work of the prostitute as a woman who is wronged and mistreated and who may respond to this abuse with self-justified violence. As such, Nuan bears little resemblance to the carefree and reckless Noi, about whom Sidaoru'ang wrote in 'Once upon a time, long, long ago', but is instead portrayed as pitiable, isolated, and rejected, a woman whose only real contact with the outside world is maintained through her friendship with her neighbour, Lo'm.

It is in this vein that Sidaoru'ang goes on to depict an entire community of prostitutes in a short story published two years later, in 1985, and entitled *Kulap daeng nai tho khao* ('The red rose in the white toilet bowl'). A group of women live together in the brothel, isolated from the outside world and developing, in its stead, a close-knit, yet marginal community of their own. From their window they are able to view an expansive landscape, stretching out into the distance, but there is no exit to it:

Here, in this place, it is not simply the bodies which are impure - even the air you breathe stinks as though it were rotting. The bar downstairs is the only place with an exit to the outside. Ah, *dreams, dreams* . . . Ahead stretches the great, broad horizon. All there is is a wall of buildings stretching southwards, and the sunlight looks as though it has never even attempted to shine into the dark, dark corners of this alleyway.²⁷

Sidaoru'ang's description, in this excerpt, of the distinctively stale smell of the brothel, only partially alleviated by air-conditioning and perfumed air spray, is one that is common to the majority of short stories on prostitution examined in this paper. In 'Light after dark' she writes that, 'The restaurant was windowless and lit by soft neon lights [. . .] and a damp, fusty odour hung in the air until the time came to turn on the air-conditioning and spray

²⁷ Sidaoru'ang, 'The red rose in the white toilet bowl', in *Maisi*. Bangkok: Than Tawan Press, 1987, p. 125.

²⁵ The massage in question is referred to by Thais as *B-course*, in which the masseuse uses her whole body rather than simply her hands. Niramorn adds that the origin of this word is unknown.

²⁶ See Pasuk, *op. cit.*, *passim*.

the rooms, the vapour from the air freshener blending with the all-pervading mustiness'.²⁸ And in Ko'n Krailat's *Su'ng mai chai do'kmai* ('Woman is not a flower'), discussed below, the sex club which the narrator visits is described as a room filled with cigarette smoke and warm, putrid air, the result of poor air-conditioning.²⁹

The Thai critic Thanet Weiphada draws attention to the opening lines of 'The red rose in the white toilet bowl': 'The pungent smell of stir-fried vegetables, piled high on an aluminium plate, drifted around the kitchen, blending with the strong odour of fried, salty fish. *Those same, old smells. Over and over again.* The same smell as yesterday'.³⁰ The italicized phrase, he argues, refers not only to the scent of cooking but to the more general atmosphere of the brothel. In support of this Thanet provides examples of other phrases that appear throughout the text.³¹

In 'The red rose in the white toilet bowl', Sidaoru'ang also makes the point that, even during the daytime, it is dark inside the brothel. A prostitute awakes late one morning and goes to the bathroom, where she sees a fresh, red rose floating in the bottom of the toilet, its petals pointing towards the bathroom door, as if staring at it in search of a point of exit. Despite the droplets of water clinging to its petals, the rose is too sullied to be retrieved and placed in a vase. The prostitute contemplates that, were she to retrieve the rose, no one would know where it had been before; but the minute the cleaner sees the rose she crushes and discards it.

The symbolism of the rose in this story echoes one of the themes in Bathoon's 'A breath of pain', namely that a fallen woman, like a dirty flower, cannot be retrieved and reinstated into society. The comparison between women and flowers is one that is well-established in Thai literary culture and which received critical reappraisal in the radical writings of the 1970s. In an article first published in 1973, entitled *Phuying pen khae do'kmai thaonan ru* ('Are women really only just like flowers?') the

²⁸ Sidaoru'ang, *Kaew yet diaw*, p. 108.

²⁹ Ko'n Krailat, *Su'ng mai chai do'kmai*, in *Rao mai chai do'mai tae rao khu' chiwit* ('We are not flowers, we are life'). Bangkok: Kan Wek Press, 1978, p. 85.

³⁰ Sidaoru'ang, 'The red rose in a white toilet bowl', op. cit., p. 124.

³¹ See Thanet Weiphada, *Yuk thi sophani con muan to' chiwit* ('An age when prostitutes are cornered by life') in *Nangsu*, Si san monthly magazine, year one, volume 3, January 1988 (Offprint paper 8, pp. 3 - 4.). Thanet goes on to show that there are other examples of symbolism in Sidaoru'ang's 'The red rose in the white toilet bowl', with reference to her description of the women's rooms: 'Big rats with stiff tails and rough, dirty skin scurried about. There was the sound of someone opening the door, the door that was always open. Some rats were daring enough as ever to forage for food in the bottom of the bag by the mat. Some rats stared at the women politely'. (See *ibid.*, p. 4.) The 'door' in this extract refers to the prostitutes' receptiveness to penetration, the 'big rats' with their 'stiff tails' who 'forage' in the 'bottom of the bag' to the male clients engaging in intercourse with these women.

journalist and literary critic, Sathian Canthinatho'n, wrote that in Thai culture a pretty girl who behaves well and keeps her virginity for a long time is compared to a rose, beautiful in both colour and form and protected by her thorns; others are pure and white like jasmine, and suited only for worship. Sathian argues that the analogy with flowers brings with it the implication that women exist only for the pleasure of men and that their actual, practical abilities go unnoticed. He suggests an alternative parallel that might be drawn, between 'useful' women and rice or banana plants.³²

Sathian's contemporary, the political activist and poet, Ciranana Phipreecha, produced a poem on the same theme, which she entitled 'The defiance of a flower'. The last two verses are as follows:

Woman has life
That erases errors with reasons.
The value of a free person
Is not to feed the lust of others.

Flowers have sharp thorns,
Not just to blossom and await admirers;
But to bloom and embrace
The fertility of the land.³³

The male writer, Ko'n Krailat also refers to the analogy between women and flowers in the title of a short story, first published in October 1975, *Su'ng mai chai do'kmai* ('Woman is not a flower'). Ko'n describes an evening of performances at a Bangkok sex show, viewed through the eyes of the narrator, who attends on his own, very much in the role of an impartial, almost disembodied observer. He watches a naked dancer placing ping-pong balls inside her vagina, expelling them, and then catching them again as they bounce back from the floor; and he notes the audience clapping and whistling excitedly as she does so. Next he sees a dancer who attracts the full attention of the audience only at the moment when she removes her underwear, whereupon the audience hold their breath in excitement, each man focusing on the same spot:

³² See Sathian Canthinatho'n, *K'hlu'n luk doem* ('The old wave'). Bangkok: Maeng Sap Press, 1976, pp. 93-6.

³³ See P.E.N. International-Thailand Center, *Thai P.E.N. anthology. Short stories and poems of social consciousness*, 1984, pp. 105-06. English translation by Sudchit Bhinyoying.

I cannot quite define the way in which this group of men were looking at the dancer. Perhaps their look contained a glimmer of pity, perhaps also a hint of satisfaction that they were getting the better of her, giving her what she deserved. Everyone's eyes were fixed on her genitals. She pulled her pants back on again, turned round and began dancing again to the music, while some of the men in the audience huffed and complained in dissatisfaction [...].

At the end of her performance the girl removed her pants again before the music came to an abrupt close. It seemed like an invitation for anyone to take a look at whatever took their fancy.³⁴

Nowhere is the male gaze on the female prostitute better exemplified than in this excerpt. The stripper is without agency, even the rhythm of her dancing being dictated by the music, to which she gyrates in automatic fashion. Her existence is validated as an object on view, there for the sole purpose of arousing the sexual desires of her audience.³⁵

In order to highlight the theme of dehumanization in this story, Ko'n introduces an implied analogy between prostitutes and dead dogs. Within the context of traditional Thai beliefs, the comparison between people and animals would be an entirely pejorative one, but this does not appear to be how Ko'n intends it: instead the dogs he depicts are pitiable and, by implication, so too is the striptease artist who reminds him of the dead puppy he has seen at the end of his street on the way to work that morning. He remembers having often seen the puppy when it was alive, running around in search of scraps and sometimes being chased away or bitten by bigger dogs in the scramble. The narrator's description of the puppy's corpse is related in the same tone as his observation of the women in the sex club:

I stood and looked at the corpse for a moment. It had no visible wounds, it was totally stiff, and its legs were pointing upwards in the air. Its mouth was agape, revealing its little white teeth, that were now attracting a trail of ants. It must have been dead for a few

³⁴ Ko'n Krailat, op. cit., p. 87. (My editing.)

³⁵ Ko'n's portrayal of the dancer in the sex show is very different from Alphonso Lingis' interpretation of the role of the spectator in the transvestite cabarets of Bangkok. (See Alphonso Lingis, 'Lust', in Lingis, *Abuses*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994, pp. 105-28.) Although Lingis notes the degree to which the performers are willing to become sex objects for their audience, he also detects in this a challenge to a sexual duel, making the viewer feel sexually inferior and less daring. Although it would be inappropriate to imply a parallel here with the events of the female sex show, attention can be drawn to the fact that, despite superficial assessments of the nature of the power balance between the viewer and the viewed, these can involve more complex emotional responses.

hours, since the night before. It looked so young and tiny. It should have had a chance to grow up and live a little longer. How many times did I find myself realizing that I had no understanding of death, no matter whose death that might be.³⁶

When the narrator leaves the club he sees a second dead dog, this time slung against a lamp-post, having been run over, and with its smashed skull coated in dried blood. It is unclear, at this point in the text, whether this animal is merely symptomatic of the melancholy overtone of the story or is intended to indicate the ubiquitous sense of depersonalization evident to Ko'n in modern society. Certainly the encounter with the second dog occurs only shortly after a conversation between the narrator and a stripper, in which she invites him to view her at another establishment which includes a live sex show between a woman and a dog.

Ko'n's fiction, like that of many of his contemporaries, writing in the socially conscious era of post-1973, treats prostitution as a social problem and lays the blame for women's degraded position in society on Thailand's inability to address and confront such issues. 'All I want to know', says the narrator, 'is what the country intends to do about all this'.³⁷ It is with this theme in view that Ko'n closes the story with the image of the narrator purchasing a newspaper, the headline of which reads that another farmers' leader has been murdered and that the government has arrested many other peasant and student activists.

Ko'n Krailat's alienated, melancholic observation of Thailand's social ills is apparent not only in 'Woman is not a flower' but also in two further stories dealing with the subject of prostitution, namely *Bon saphan sung* ('On the tall bridge') and *K'ho' hai phom rusu'k khon diaw* ('Let me alone be the one to have feelings'). Both stories, moreover, illustrate the sense of unresolved ambivalence towards prostitution that is evident in the work of socially-conscious male writers, and which provides a key to understanding why Ko'n renounced his literary career in the 1980s to run his own brothel/massage parlour.

In 'On the tall bridge' the narrator takes a friend, Adun, to observe the prostitutes working in boats on a Bangkok canal. The boats are moored under a bridge, with one woman and an oarsman in each. When a customer gets into a boat the oarsman rows it out and moors it under the bridge

³⁶ Ko'n, op. cit., p. 89.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 91.

where, concealed by a canopy, the prostitute entertains her client for a fee of 20 baht (c. 60 pence), half of which she then shares with the boatman.³⁸

The narrator tells Adum that although he often comes to observe the activities at the canal-side, his purpose in doing so seems to be one of perverse and bitter 'pleasure': 'I take no joy in coming here', he announces, 'but I still want to come, all the same. Knowing about, and seeing all the painful things in life make me hate it all the more'.³⁹ In response to Adum's enquiries as to whether he has ever slept with any of these women, the narrator confirms that he has not, although he has contemplated it, albeit only so that he might talk to one of them.

The focus of the narrator's attention on observing rather than participating in the sexual act with a prostitute is a common element of stories by male writers, illustrated in the work of Ko'n Kraiat, and in Banthoon's 'A breath of pain', in which the narrator, miraculously, defines himself as a well-established friend of Kham Fo'ng, who wishes to save her rather than sleep with her. In this way the writer reserves the moral credibility to comment upon prostitution as a social evil, while simultaneously supplying sensational details about the practice of prostitution. Given the high percentage of Thai men who do frequent prostitutes (it is estimated that 96% of Thai men lose their virginity to a paid sex-worker) it would be reasonable to assume that authors were also writing from their own, first-hand experiences.

As a result of the widespread practice of frequenting brothels and massage parlours, it is common for Thai women to be exposed to the infidelity of a husband or boyfriend. Again there is some ambivalence to be observed here, given that some women encourage their partners to seek sexual satisfaction from a prostitute; this refers especially to girlfriends wishing to keep their virginity until they receive a firm offer of marriage, and to pregnant wives who do not want to put their unborn child at risk through intercourse. At the same time, however, many Thai women experience an inevitable sense

of betrayal, often provoking rage, when they discover that their long-term partners have been unfaithful.⁴⁰

This situation is depicted in Sidaoru'ang's short story of 1984, *Sida dap fai* ('Sida extinguishes the flames'), the tale of Sida's suspicion that her husband, Thotsakan, is having an affair. The opening reads as follows:

'Sida, I'll be home late tonight.'

It was, in fact, what Sida had expected him to say, simply that she had not been able to predict quite how he would phrase it. She looked up at the husband whom she loved so dearly. Her heart beat fast and she tried to restrain all her emotions which came to her, uncontrollably. She responded somewhat evasively, feeling as though a sharp spear had impaled her, making her stoop and hide her face.

'Will you be home in time for supper?' she couldn't help sounding rather curt.

'No, I don't think so, but then again, I'm not sure. Some friends at work are taking me out. You go ahead and eat with the little one. Don't bother waiting for me.'⁴¹

By the time Thotsakan is due to leave the house, Sida has recomposed herself, and even manages a smile as she comments how smartly dressed he is, despite the irritation he has provoked in her. While Thotsakan is out, Sida reads his diary and finds the entry for that day (14 October) includes the woman's name 'Mantho'. Sida lies face down in the dark, showing no interest in her son, Hanuman, and feeling irritated by the sound of commercials for washing powder on the television which he is watching. Today Sida fails to wash the clothes, leaving them instead to soak in a basin, and piling up the dirty pots in the kitchen sink.

When Thotsakan arrives home that evening, he comes with presents for his wife and son. Hanuman whispers to Thotsakan that Sida has been crying for almost the entire day, and has even left him to wash up all on his

38 The SEAWrite award-winning writer, Atsiri Thammachote, also refers to this form of prostitution as the setting of his short story, *Thu'ng khras ca nii klai pai cak lamkhlo'ng sai nan* ('It is time to leave this canal'), available in English translation by Chamnongsri L. Rutnin. (See Atsiri Thammachote, *Khuntho'ng, cao ca klap ma mu'a fa sang* ('Kuntong, You will return at dawn'), Bangkok: Ko' Kai Press, 1978, pp. 77-82.) In Atsiri's story the women in the boats charge 30 baht (c. 80 pence) for their services. Moreover, this text provides an example of the prostitute with some degree of power: when a client complains that he has not been given a good service for his money, the following, abrasive, confrontation ensues:

'Go to a hotel, if you want something better. This is all you get for thirty baht', a woman's voice screamed back.

'You bitch! I'll smash your teeth in for talking like that!'

'Go ahead, and see if I don't bash your head with this paddle!'

(See *ibid.*, p. 80.)

39 Ko'n Kraiat, *Bon saphan sung*, in *Rao mai chai do'kmai, rao khu' chiwit*, op. cit., p. 26.

40 Walter Irvine notes that Thailand has the highest rate of *actual* castration in the world. It is not uncommon, he recounts, for husbands to retire at night clad in the protective layers of five pairs of underpants as a precaution against a wife who is angered by his sexual infidelities. Irvine makes apposite reference to an article from the *Straits Times* (31 May 1980) reporting the opening of a special unit at Bangkok's Sirirat Hospital, whose work was dedicated solely to the reconnection of severed male members. (See Walter Irvine, 'The Thai-Yuan "madman" and the "modernising, developing Thai nation" as bounded entities under threat: a study in the replication of a single image', unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of London, 1982.)

41 Sidaoru'ang, *Matsi*, op. cit., p. 36.

own. Sida, for her part, remarks how strange it is that, even though her husband has just come in from outside, his skin looks freshly showered:

'What's up? What's wrong with me taking a bit of a break one day after work and going out with some friends?' He glared at his wife.

'Nothing. Nothing at all. After all, everyone has the same rights, don't they?'

'And what exactly do you mean by that? Do you want to go out? Well, go then. Then you'll know that all the problem is here, is that you're jealous.' Thotsakan stamped and shouted in rage.⁴²

When Sida admits that she has read her husband's diary, the infuriated Thotsakan reveals that he has been with his friends to a massage parlour called *Mantho*, but that afterwards he hurried home and even bought presents for his family on the way. Rather than apologize for his infidelity, Thotsakan changes the topic of the argument, and chides his wife for betraying him by reading his diary. 'If I'd only known,' Thotsakan complains, 'I wouldn't have bothered coming home at all.'⁴³ And when Sida undertakes never again to spy on him in such a way, his response is simply, 'Oh really! And how will I know? I won't exactly be able to tell if you have looked in my diary. If you behave like a spy in my very own house, I won't feel like doing anything here. I won't have any freedom.'⁴⁴

Interesting features to be noted in this story are the fact that Sida retaliates against Thotsakan by neglecting to do her housework, it being her only source of power and her own way of failing in her matrimonial role, as she suspects him to be failing in his. Thotsakan, however, retains the upper hand, despite his infidelity, and is far more angered by Sida's indiscretions than she is permitted to be by him. What anger Sida is given the opportunity to express is aimed at her husband and not at the prostitutes he has visited. Sida's complaint is with Thotsakan and not 'Mantho'.

In 'Sida extinguishes the flames', Thotsakan goes to the brothel largely as a result of social obligation, though not entirely against his own free will. While it is common for Thai men to visit prostitutes in groups of two, three or more, it appears from most short stories composed by male writers that the narrator is usually a solitary client, rarely in the company of others. In Ko'n Krailat's 'Let me alone be the one to have feelings', for

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 43.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

example, the narrator encounters a prostitute at a bus stop on his way home from work and signals to her to go with him to a motel:

'I followed her in silence down the *soi*. It was wet and smelled damp and putrid. Blurred lights illuminated the path, one that I should not really have been taking. And what lay ahead of me could in no way be described as good. But there I was, taking that very path and having forgotten all thoughts of going home.'⁴⁵

The narrator's ambivalence is illustrated not only in this excerpt, but throughout the piece; once inside the motel room the narrator lies, clothed, on a bed, rickety from repeated use, and watches the woman undress. To the reader he comments:

Every time I meet a woman in this situation there are the same old questions and the same old thoughts: here was yet another Thai prostitute, a woman leading a lifeless life, existing only in order to satisfy the sexual desires of men, without the least understanding of the deadly blows society dealt her. She merely led this terrible, putrid life until the day when she would become little more than a lump of rotting flesh. How many such women have I met since I encountered my first prostitute? I can't even remember who the first one was, nor do I even know whether she is still alive.⁴⁶

Evidently the narrator has considerable experience of sexual encounters with prostitutes, yet he also appears to find these women pitiable. Speculations can be made, particularly given the depressive orientation of Ko'n's writing, about the existence of a psychological element of 'somasochism' in the nature of the 'pleasure' he derives from his encounters with prostitutes.

Although it may be viable to examine Thai prostitution from a psychoanalytical perspective, it is important to assert that economic and cultural factors must remain paramount in any explanation of the degree to which prostitution is so widespread in the country. The situation in Thailand is best explained by the definition of Kinsey and others that: 'Men go to prostitutes because they can pay for the sexual relations and forget other responsibilities, whereas coitus with other girls may involve them

⁴⁵ Ko'n Krailat, *Kho'hai phom ruusu'k khon diaw*, in *ibid.*, p. 233.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 234.

socially and legally beyond anything which they care to undertake'.⁴⁷ Much of what has been written by Western psychoanalytical theorists on the nature of the relationship between prostitute and client in the West may have some applicability to the exchange between Thai clients and prostitutes, as revealed through fiction.

Estela Welldon argues, for example, that in their exchange both prostitute and client view the contact they have with each other as a means of fulfilling a need, one that is made possible by the anonymity of both parties and their lack of emotional commitment to each other. As Welldon writes, 'They have different expectations of what is ostensibly just a physical act, but in reality has many symbolic associations. Cultural, sociological and economic factors are interlinked with deep emotional motivations'.⁴⁸

Welldon postulates that a man's encounter with a prostitute simultaneously allows him to return to a state of infancy in which mother ministers to his physical needs and it allows him to satisfy a deep-seated urge to debase the mother-figure. The anonymity of prostitution removes the threat to the male of being subsumed by an all-invading mother figure and is thus rendered safe.

In Ko'n Krailat's 'Let me alone be the one to have feelings' the prostitute is, in actuality, a mother, revealing herself to be five months pregnant. The narrator's response to this is again one of ambivalence, for he explains that her pregnancy was both the reason for him choosing her in the first place, and doubly the reason for him not wishing to engage in sexual intercourse with her.

In the course of their conversation, the prostitute explains that, because she is not as pretty as many of the other girls, her pregnancy is a way of attracting customers, some of whom feel that it is more physically pleasurable to penetrate a pregnant woman, some of whom believe that, with such a woman, they will not be exposed to the risks of catching venereal disease. The narrator contemplates the difference in the way that pregnant women are treated, some being carefully tended to from the moment they conceive, others, like this prostitute, experiencing nothing other than an endless stream of men bearing down on her swollen abdomen.

But it is the prostitute's own lack of 'motherly instincts' which is portrayed in this text as the most shocking aspect of the encounter, for she

herself explains that her pregnancy was not an act of carelessness, but serves two purposes – one to attract more clients, the other to provide her with extra income when the child is born and she can sell it. The narrator observes that there is clearly something abnormal about this woman, that she shows no pain or sadness.

There are parallels to be drawn here with Welldon's contention that prostitute and client are, both physically and psychologically, engaged in a vengeful campaign against the mother.⁴⁹ This same view is supported by the psychoanalyst, Edward Glover, when he writes that;

the man who has compulsive interest in prostitutes is still fixated to his old profane love and seeks, without knowing it, to gratify in adult life the tabooed desires of infancy. For her part the prostitute has similar unconscious aims, but their scope is more ambitious. The client, the 'strange man' who pays for her favours, is the deteriorated image of her father; at the same time, she registers her violently jealous disapproval of her mother's marriage by, as it were, debasing her own feminine currency.⁵⁰

Ciranan Phipricha testifies to the opinion that, while gullibility and lack of education are important contributing factors to women's passage into prostitution there are, also, individual reasons such as physical or psychological abnormalities.⁵¹ Some women might, she suggests, have a disproportionate need for sexual contact, might enjoy exposing themselves to violence or might be sexual exhibitionists. The consequent promiscuity may then eventually lead them into paid sexual encounters.

Welldon also notes that, while most prostitutes hold men in contempt, their own self-esteem is extremely low, as a result of which they expose themselves to a great many risks. Her observations, based upon clinical, psychotherapeutic treatment of such women in Britain, show remarkable similarities to those made by Thai authors based upon their own encounters with Thai prostitutes.⁵² In 'Let me alone be the one to have feelings', for example, the prostitute is irritated by the narrator's endless questions and

49 Welldon, *op. cit.*, p. 116.

50 See E. Glover, *The psychopathology of prostitution*. London: Institute for the Scientific Study and Treatment of Delinquency, 1943, p. 5.

51 Ciranan refers to a sample survey carried out in 1960 of 843 prostitutes. Of them 305 were found to be illiterate, 510 had received formal education up to the age of eight, and only 28 had received secondary education. (Ciranan Phipricha, *Lok thi si: prawaisai na mai kho'ng thai* ('The fourth world: the history of the new face of Thailand'). Bangkok: San su'ksa Press, 1979.)

52 Welldon is Clinic Tutor at London's Portman Clinic.

47 A.C. Kinsey, W.B. Pomeroy, and C.E. Martin, *Sexual behavior in the human male*. Philadelphia, PA: W.B. Saunders, 1948, 607.

48 Estela V. Welldon, *Mother, Madonna, whore: the idealization and denigration of motherhood*. New York and London: Guildford Press, 1992, p. 106.

soon becomes annoyed by her client's tardiness in initiating sexual intercourse:

'Listen you ... Why all these questions?', she complained. 'If you're going to do something then make haste and get on with it.'
'No, I mean it. I'd rather just talk. I really don't feel like sleeping with you right now.'

'Well ...', a glimmer of a smile flashed across her face as she rejoined with the next sentence. 'If you don't feel up to it, then no problem. We can have a little chat first if you like, but just don't make it too long.'⁵³

Dialogues of this nature also occur in other short stories by male writers, in particular those of Atsiri Thammachote and Surachai Canthimatho'n, discussed below, and may serve to support Welldon's theory that intercourse does not always take place between prostitute and client because it is not, unconsciously, of primary importance in the encounter; much more important is the lack of emotional threat posed by the prostitute to her male client.

Welldon's further suggestion, that the prostitutes' self-neglect is masked by a show of contempt for the conventions of mainstream society, is similarly illustrated in contemporary Thai literature: in 'Let me alone be the one to have feelings', for example, the pregnant prostitute refuses to adopt the traditional role of the nurturing mother, but talks instead of selling her baby as soon as it is born. By such action she renders herself the antithesis of the Thai mother, defined by Mulder as the symbol of moral goodness, ever-giving, caring and self-sacrificing towards 'her dependants who rely on her for stability and continuity in life'.⁵⁴ Her behaviour also appears to support Welldon's argument that the prostitute's readiness for revenge, directed, superficially, against socio-economic submission and against a man's world, is actually directed against the mother (both her own biological mother and, in symbolic terms, her own ability to be a mother).⁵⁵

In the context of Atsiri Thammachote's *Niyay klang khu'n* ('A tale of the night'), the relationship between client and prostitute evokes that of the father/daughter dyad. A middle-aged man, recently separated from his wife

⁵³ Ko'n Krailat, op. cit., pp. 237-38.

⁵⁴ Niels Mulder, *Inside Thai society: an interpretation of everyday life*. Bangkok: Duang Kamol, 1990, p. 25.

⁵⁵ Welldon, op. cit., p. 128.

and experiencing difficulties in bringing up his teenage daughter single-handed, is taken by a friend to a brothel offering young adolescent prostitutes. There he finds himself in bed with a fourteen-year-old, whom the author describes as follows:

At her age she should have been running around in a school playground, dressed in a blue school skirt and little white shoes and ankle socks. She should have been dreaming the sweet daydreams of little girls at the beginning of their adolescence all over the world - pretty flowers and handsome young men who had some kindness in their hearts. So where had it all gone wrong?⁵⁶

Like the prostitutes in so many of the short stories analysed in this paper, this girl is similarly hardened to the demands of her profession, perfunctory and unemotional, telling her client to hurry to do what he will with her. Her behaviour makes him feel that she sees him as nothing other than a plaything, no different from the images on the video which she puts on in order to arouse him. As in the stories by Ko'n Krailat, a pervasive sense of alienation and of absence of human communication is a primary feature of what is, at least physically speaking, an intimate exchange.

The video depicts a steamy scene of adolescents at a discolthèque, reminding the man of his own daughter, who has gone out that night with a group of friends, perhaps to a party, perhaps dancing, he does not really know where. As the prostitute lies beside him, watching the film, her foot beats out the rhythm of the music and she appears to be chewing something:

'Are you chewing gum?'

'No, a sweet.'

He was somewhat taken aback.

'What, you're still eating sweets, at your age.'

'Yes, of course. I'm still a kid, you know.'⁵⁷

A sense of shock and conscience, typical of these short stories, is aroused in the client by the situation of the prostitute's life, one which destroys his desire for a sexual exchange. Instead, the client prefers merely to talk to the girl, asking her questions about how she has come to find herself in such a

⁵⁶ Atsiri Thammachote, *Niyay klang khu'n*, in *Kho' lhaan, maew lae khon mao* ('The beggar, the cat, and the drunkard'). Bangkok: Ko' Kai Press, 1988, p. 24.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 27-28.

profession. She responds to him somewhat playfully, explaining that all she will provide him with is lies, as if this discourse is also part of her sexual repertoire, dramatized, and distanced from reality.

In the first explanation of her circumstances she tells him she is a country girl who was sold into prostitution by her parents at the age of ten. In the second explanation she reinvents herself as a native of Bangkok, from a home in which her parents often argued. Her mother had vented her frustrations on her by beating her and so she had run away from home with her boyfriend, from whom she had later separated.

This second story causes the man to think of his own daughter and he consequently vows that he will never beat her again in order to discipline her, but will try to provide her with the love and warmth she needs to prevent her from delinquency.

'A tale of the night' is essentially a story demonstrating the teaching of social consciousness through literature, a trend established in Thailand from the late 1940s onwards and which experienced a distinct revival in the aftermath of the October 'revolution' of 1973.⁵⁸ Published in 1988, it no longer contains the political overtones present in the work of leftist intellectuals writing in the previous decade, but addresses the problems facing urban, middle-class Bangkokians, i.e. of broken families, increasing teenage promiscuity, and adolescent delinquency. The literary style of the piece lends importance to form and aesthetics as well as conveying a serious message, thus contrasting with the socially conscious writing of the 1970s, in which less attention was paid to refining literary style and greater emphasis placed upon conveying a simple, straightforward, social message. Sidaoru'ang's writing provides a good example of this in the 1970s, her two stories, 'Once upon a time, long, long ago' and 'Light after dark' lacking aesthetic complexity (*wannasin*) in their attempt to convey their moral message to as wide as possible an audience.

Ko'n Kraiat's tales of prostitution, all written during the late 1970s, reveal a sense of despair with the world that may reflect the widespread response of intellectuals to the political and social problems they were experiencing at the time; the grand hopes for social, economic, and political change that had been raised in 1973 were destroyed three years later when, on 6 October 1976, student protests were violently crushed by the state and a hard-line, right-wing regime was reinstated.

It is by means of a contrast then, that Surachai Canthimatho'n's slightly earlier story, *Sangkharu* ('Heavenly bodies'), may be introduced into this study of prostitution. Somewhat ironically, Surachai is the only writer

under consideration in this paper to have actively joined the Communist Party of Thailand in the aftermath of October 1976, though he wrote 'Heavenly Bodies' some years earlier, in 1972. Moreover, his contribution to the insurgent cause was predominantly an artistic one, through the popular songs he wrote and performed with the music group *Carawan*; and his well-established reputation as an irrepressible womanizer vies for equal place with that of his reputation as a leftist.

Characteristic of pre-October 1973 *Zeigeist*, 'Heavenly bodies' is a more optimistic and playful piece than other texts under examination. The client, a young man called Sen, is somewhat in awe of the beautiful prostitute he chooses in a down-market Bangkok brothel. Having paid the proprietor fifty baht, Sen is shown to a room, where he undresses and lies on the bed, awaiting the arrival of his 'temporary wife' and wishing he were once again a child. His encounter with the prostitute, Du'an Phen, is a shy and tentative one, in which Sen describes the shape of her nose as reminiscent of the hilly landscapes of his home region and likens the fresh, reddish hue of her breasts to a bunch of ripening rose apples, with which he plays, like a child with a ball. As he lies next to Du'an Phen, Sen fantasizes about what it might be like to be a small, red ant running across her body, first investigating her nostrils to seek out the treasures that lie within, then venturing into the jungle of her hair and ascending the mountains of her breasts.

Meanwhile, Du'an Phen is beginning to fall asleep and impatiently reminds Sen that if he intends to make love to her he should hurry. But now he, too, is tired, and instead of making an amorous move towards her he snuggles up next to her naked body and closes his eyes restfully. Du'an Phen wakes him and again reminds him of the limitations on her time. Sen is slightly annoyed and decides that he will leave. Both dress and Du'an Phen gives him a goodbye peck on the cheek, commenting that it is as if he has never slept with a woman before, which Sen initially denies, but then admits to.

'Heavenly bodies' is essentially a story about Thai male sexuality, expressed through a man's interaction with a prostitute, a commonplace scenario given that the majority of Thai men lose their virginity in these circumstances, rather than with an established, long-term partner.

Sen's immature sexuality is expressed through his reminiscences about his childhood and home town, evoked by Du'an Phen's naked body. Surachai draws an analogy between Du'an Phen's naked body and the wonders of nature, thus reworking deeply-rooted Thai literary traditions, in particular those of the *nirat* or love-longing poetry in which the poet travels

⁵⁸ For further details of this development see Sidaoru'ang, *A drop of glass*, pp. 20-30.

far away from his loved one and is reminded of her by the various aspects of nature which he encounters on his journey.⁵⁹ Sen's naivety, and his objectification of Du'an Phen are exemplified by his comparison of her to a painting by Renoir and his subsequent conversation piece on the French artist in which she is inevitably unable to participate.

As a tale which maps the initiation of Thai male sexual experience, 'Heavenly bodies' reveals something of the complexity of the power distribution between men and women in the client/prostitute context.⁶⁰ In the opening section of the story, Sen has total control of the situation in which he places himself, the prostitutes from whom he chooses Du'an Phen having none. It is Sen who observes and monitors them; they who are observed, objectified and called upon to respond to Sen's power of choice:

Two full-figured, pale-skinned prostitutes were lying there on cushions, looking exhausted. Neither of them looked at him. Their eyes were softly closed, their hands resting, one on top of the other. One woman lay with her legs spread, revealing her flower-patterned underpants. When he gave a quiet cough one of the women looked up at him for a second and then closed her eyes again with an air of indifference. He felt slightly annoyed and walked on to another room, where he encountered the very same situation. Still the women showed no interest. He thought of going on to yet a third room when he saw a group of five or six prostitutes. They giggled and teased one another when they caught sight of the men, among whom Sen was standing and who were watching them. Some of the women attempted to provide an explicit show of all that they had on offer, others were getting dressed, yet others were eating noodles, savouring their delights. Sen observed each of the women and watched all their gestures before making up his mind once and for all.⁶¹

⁵⁹ For a detailed account of the *nirat* genre in Thai poetry see Manas Chitakasem, 'The nature and development of the *nirat* genre in Thai poetry', *Journal of the Siam Society*, 60 (2), 1972, pp. 135-68.

⁶⁰ Writing about the relationship between Thai prostitutes and Western men who engage their services while on holiday in Thailand, Cohen argues that it is ultimately the women who have the preserve on power. He proposes that when these Western men return to their own countries, perhaps to an unexciting and low-skilled job, they rephrase their encounter with the Thai prostitute as a truly intimate and romantic one, writing and responding to letters which often involve sending substantial sums of money. See Erik Cohen, 'Lovelorn farangs: the correspondence between foreign men and Thai girls', *Anthropological Quarterly*, 59 (3), 1986, 115-27. See also Erik Cohen, 'Thai girls and farang men - the edge of ambiguity', *Annals of Tourism Research*, 9, 1982, pp. 403-28.

⁶¹ Surachai Canthinatho'n, *Sangkharu*, in *Khwam pa ma yu'an*. Bangkok: Kamphaeng Press, 1988, pp. 86-87.

The power of the gaze is crucial to the preservation of autonomy in many of the stories by male writers under analysis here; and it is one which Sen is keen to preserve throughout:

Her eyes looked so, so mysterious. What was it that made people's eyes look the way they did, he wondered to himself. Her eyes were like marbles, lubricated with clear liquid, glimmering and flickering, and in them lay the reflection of his own, naked body.

'Close your eyes', he said to her, and he put his finger over her eyelids with a hint of coercion. Let me look at you. Don't you look at me, he thought.⁶²

There is clearly a threat here to Sen, both that he may have his own self-image reflected back to him through a woman, and that she will assert herself as an equal partner in their exchange by her ability to look at him. Sen responds to this by reasserting his economic superiority - he has paid for her time - and tells her to close her eyes, so disempowering her. The only agency she retains is that of reminding him that her time with him is limited (presumably by the fee he has paid) and that he should hurry to make love to her. To the virgin Sen there is inevitably a sexual challenge here, one which he avoids taking up and which reveals his sexual inexperience.

The aim of this paper has been to examine a selection of contemporary short stories that shed light on some features of prostitution in Thailand. These revolve around such issues as the nature and distribution of power between client and prostitute, the use of violence and coercion, either by clients, pimps, or madams, the psychological and emotional aspects that are implicit in the encounter between prostitute and client, and the ambivalent attitude of some writers towards prostitution. From the work of Sidaoru'ang and Niramon the observation can be made that female writers pay considerable attention to the life experience of the prostitute, which they recall through their own interactions with such women, and in the words of these women. Not unexpectedly, for male writers, again writing from their own experience of encounters with sex-workers, the perspective on prostitution is either that of an adoring client, a shocked male participant in the contract, or of a male voyeur, at one time horrified and intrigued by what he views. Additionally, there appears some truth in the perception that Thai

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 89.

fictional writing on prostitution reflects the social and political climate in which it is composed; most certainly it is the case that, since 1973, prostitution has been firmly placed on the agenda of socially conscious literature, to be addressed as a complex problem, permeating all levels of Thai society.

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For article submissions, please contact:
Dr Ian Brown, Department of History, SOAS, Thornhaugh Street,
Russell Square, London WC1H 0XG, UK. Fax: 0171 323 6190

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